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ABSTRACT

A study examined the early literacy experiences of rural disabled children, ages 3-8. Data originated from a subset of the National Household Education Survey of 1995 that included 1,316 families with disabled children and 8,009 families with nondisabled children. Participants were asked about their race/ethnicity, education level, native language, presence of children with disabilities in the household, child and family literacy activities, and children's grade level. Results indicate that of families with disabled children, 85 percent of those living in rural areas and 72 percent living outside urban areas were White, whereas, there was greater racial and ethnic diversity in urban areas; English was the native language for the vast majority of mothers in rural areas; the incidence of disabled children was higher among parents with less than a high school education; and Black children had a higher incidence of disabilities than did other racial and ethnic groups. With regard to early literacy, over half of the children, both with and without disabilities, were read to every day by a family member and three quarters of the children were read to on a regular basis each week (at least three or more times). However, rural families differed from urban families in several respects: a greater percentage of urban disabled children were not read to at all by a family member, but a greater percentage of rural disabled children did not read to a family member on a regular basis. During the primary grades, families who had disabled children were as involved with early literacy activities as families with nondisabled children. However, preschool children with disabilities engaged in early literacy activities with family members to a lesser extent than preschool children without disabilities. Includes demographic tables. (LP)

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EARLY LITERACY ACTIVITIES: EXPERIENCES OF RURAL FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Evidence points to the fact that family-child engagement in literacy activities is important for the development of children's literacy, especially for children who are "at risk" for school failure (Paulu, 1992; Wigfield & Asher, 1984; Zill, Collins, West, & Germino Hausken, 1995). A direct relationship exists between family-child engagement in literacy and "at risk" characteristics that have been identified in the literature. Examples of such characteristics include single parenthood, low socio-economic status, low parent educational background, and language spoken at home. Data collected in 1991 and 1993 for the National Household Education Survey (NHES) clearly showed that "at risk"children were less likely to have been read to, told stories regularly by a family member, or visited a library (Wright, Germino Hausken, & West, 1994).

Several researchers (Baker, et al., 1996; Wright, et al., 1994) have examined children's early literacy experiences at home. Middle income families viewed literacy as a source of entertainment; and, therefore, encouraged their children to participate in joint story book reading and independent interactions with print. A higher percentage of children were read to in homes where the mother's native language was English. Low income families emphasized structural activities to develop literacy skills. Black and Hispanic children were more likely to be taught letters and words than other children. These families provided fewer print-related activities and the activities that were provided were designed for the cultivation of skills such as identifying letters and reciting the alphabet.

Research has emphasized family-child early literacy experiences in the general population (Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996; Thompson, Mixon, & Serpell, 1996). Very little is known about the early literacy experiences of children with disabilities who live in rural areas. The purpose of this study was to investigate the early literacy experiences of children with disabilities who live in rural areas. This exploratory study focused on a subset of a large data set, the National Household Education Survey of 1995, that was released by the U.S. Department of Education in the Fall 1996.

Methodology

Background: The National Household Education Survey of 1995

The National Household Education Survey of 1995 (NHES: 95) was developed by the U.S. Department of Education to collect information concerning two main areas: adults' participation in adult education and children's participation in child care and early education programs. Two earlier NHES surveys, NHES: 91 and NHES: 93, provided the first comprehensive views of early care and education program participation of young children in the United States.

The early care and education component of the 1995 NHES Survey was designed to survey families of young children with and without disabilities, ages birth through 10 years, and to collect information regarding education, services, family activities, and early care. The Survey consisted of two instruments: a screening interview and Early Childhood Program Participation (ECPP)interview. The ECPP interview collected extensive information on a number of children's personal and household demographic characteristics, parent/guardian characteristics, early care and education, children's health and disability statuses, and literacy-related home activities. The survey included some questions regarding special services and the individualized family service plan (IFSP). There were no questions

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regarding an individualized education program (IEP).

NHES:95 survey methodology. NHES: 95 was a random digit dial telephone survey that was conducted by Westat, Inc. The sample was drawn from households with telephones in the 50 states and the District of Columbia and conducted from January through April, 1995. Special weighting procedures were used to adjust the survey estimates to match totals from the Current Population Survey, using poststratification variables that are associated with telephone coverage. Families were identified as living in a rural area, outside an urban area, or in an urban area, according to the U.S. Census.

Each household interview began with a Screener that was obtained information used to sample adults and children for the Early Childhood Program Participation (ECPP) interviews. ECPP interviews were completed with parents of 14, 064 children, ages birth to 10 years. These in depth interviews included 4,135 infants and toddlers, 3, 431 preschool children, 1,680 kindergarten children, 4, 717 primary school children, and 101 home school children.

Data reliability. In order to minimize potential bias associated with nonresponse, several techniques were employed. These consisted of a calling protocol, refusal conversion efforts, and implementation of a Spanish language questionnaire. The average administration time of the survey (12.6 minutes) was considered to be a critical factor in obtaining high response rates and reliable estimates. The completion rate for the ECPP Interview was 90.4 %. The overall response rate was 66.3 % (the product of the Screener completion rate and the ECPP interview completion rate).

Subjects

For this study, a subset was derived from NHES:95 that consisted of families with young children ages 3 through 8 years of age, since age 8 is generally defined as the upper limit of early childhood. These families included 1,316 families of children with disabilities and 8, 009 families with children without disabilities. Families were located in the three population areas (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

For this study, the following variables were identified and tagged from the 1995 NHES data set:

1. Race/Ethnicity: The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they were White, Black, Hispanic, or other (which included American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, or some other race).

2. Parent Education: We were interested in several survey questions relating to the education of the child's parents. These questions included whether or not the mother and the father had a high school diploma or GED. Other questions focused on the highest level of education for the child's parents.

3. Native Language: These survey questions sought information regarding whether or not English was the native language of the mother and father.

4. Children with Disabilities: The family member responding to the survey indicated whether or not the child had a disability such as specific learning disabilities, mental retardation, speech impairment, serious emotional disturbance, deafness or hearing impairment, blindness or visual impairment, orthopedic impairment or another health impairment.

5. Child and Family Literacy Activities: The survey contained several questions regarding home literacy activities including the extent to which: a family member read to their child, the child read to a family member, a family member told a child a story, and a family member visited a library with their child.

6. Grade Level: Children were identified by grade level including: preschool, kindergarten, first, second, or third grade.

Once the data subset was created a preliminary analysis of the variables was conducted using SPSS (SPSS,

Inc., 1997). WestVarPC (Westate, Inc., n.d.), a software package designed for use with complex sampling procedures, was employed to refine the data analysis and to compute replicate variance estimates. For estimating sampling errors, a jackknife method (JK1) was used.

Results

Rural Families with Disabilities

The demographic characteristics of the families in this study were examined by population area (Table 2). Families with disabilities living in rural areas (85 %) and outside urban areas (72 %) were overwhelming White; whereas, in urban areas, there was greater diversity in respect to race and ethnicity (57 %). English was the native language for the vast majority of mothers in rural areas and decreased gradually in more populated areas: rural mothers (94 %); mothers outside urban areas (92 %); urban mothers (84.6 %). Fathers, apparently, were not native English speaking to the degree of mothers: in rural areas (76 %) and in urban areas (52 %).

Insert Table 2 about here

Families who had a child with a disability differed from families without disabilities in several important areas. In general, there was a trend in the incidence of children with disabilities to be higher among parents with less than high school education than for parents with a high school diploma or higher education. However, the standard error of these reports was also higher than for other parents with more education.

Among Black children, there seemed to be a higher percentage of disabilities than in other race/ethnic groups. This difference occurred across population areas. In rural families, 9% of Black families reported that their child had a disability and 7% reported their children were developing typically. Outside urban areas, 11% of Black families reported a child with a disability; 8% reported no disabilities. In urban areas, 22.8% of Black families reported a child with a disability; 19% reported that their children did not have disabilities.

Rural Families and Early Literacy Activities

Reading to children. In general, over half of the young children, both with and without disabilities, in our study were read to every day by a family member and three quarters of the children were read to on a regular basis each week (at least three or more times). Although reading to children occurred on a regular basis for many children, 4 to 6% of the children had no family member who read to them in the past week (Table 3).

Across population areas, there was a trend for primary age children with disabilities to be read to more frequently than children without disabilities. Further analysis of this data by grade level indicated that reading every day peaks around first grade, begins to drop in second grade, and then falls off by third grade.

In contrast, nursery school children with disabilities were read to less frequently than their peers. Seven percent of the families read to their child with a disability daily; while for children without disabilities, 11 % of the families read to their child daily.

Insert Table 3 about here

Child read to family. In general, few children read to a member of their family on a daily basis. Across population areas, 17.8% to 25% of the children with disabilities and 15% to 18% of the children without disabilities read daily to a family member. There was a trend for children with disabilities to read more regularly (at least three or more times a week) to a family member than for children without disabilities. In rural areas, far fewer children with disabilities (32%) read to a family member on a regular basis (at least three or more times a week) than children with disabilities in urban areas (67%). An analysis by grade level indicated that reading to a family member peaked at second grade for children with disabilities and at first grade for children without disabilities. Reading on a regular basis dropped sharply after that for both groups of children.

Family storytelling. For all the children in this study, more family members told their children stories than read stories to them. This trend was found for children both with and without disabilities and across population areas. Rural families with disabilities tended to use storytelling more frequently than families living in urban and outside urban areas. Similar to other early literacy activities, storytelling decreased sharply by second grade for all children. Interestingly, more children with disabilities were told stories more frequently in kindergarten, first, and second grade than children without disabilities. However, nursery school children with disabilities were told stories less frequently than children without disabilities.

Visits to the library. Across population areas, visits to the library with a family member in the past month ranged from 39% for rural children with disabilities to 45% for urban children with disabilities. In general more children, both with and without disabilities, living in urban and outside urban areas visited the library than rural children. Visits to the library tended to peak in kindergarten for all children.

In each of the population areas, children with disabilities visited the library less frequently than children without disabilities. Nursery school children with disabilities (3.68 %) visited the library less frequently than nursery school children without disabilities (7.83 %).

Discussion

The demographics of this study illustrate that most of the families living in rural areas were White, native English speaking families. For the vast majority of the families, the highest level of education for the child's parents was at least a high school diploma, GED, or beyond. Parents who had less than a high school education reported having a child with a disability more often than not. This finding is not surprising as parent education level has long been known to be a key indicator for children at risk.

For each of the population areas, the reports of Black families indicated a higher incidence of disabilities than other racial or ethnic groups. The disproportionate representation of African American children who are identified as having disabilities is disturbing. The impact of "at risk" factors such as single parenthood, low socio-economic status, low parent educational background, and language spoken at home should be explored further. Consideration should be given to the extent the incidence of disabilities is related to assessment and identification procedures.

This study found that rural families promoted early literacy in a variety of ways. Parents read to and told stories to their children, listened to them read, and visited the library. With regard to early literacy activities, rural families differed from families living in urban or outside urban areas in several respects. Fewer rural children with disabilities were not read to at all by a family member compared to urban children with disabilities. However, fewer rural children with disabilities read to a family member on a regular basis than children living in urban areas. Fewer rural children visited the library with a family member in the past month compared to children living in urban or outside urban areas.

During the primary grades, families who had children with disabilities were as involved with early literacy activities as families who had children who are developing typically . However, before school age 5, there was a marked difference between the level of involvement in literacy activities for families and children with disabilities. Preschool children with disabilities engaged in early literacy activities with family members to a less extent that preschool children without disabilities. This finding raises several questions. Does the daily care of a child with disabilities, prevent many families from having time to spend in other ways? How can various early childhood special education services support early literacy activities for young children with disabilities?

Schools and agencies responsible for services to children with disabilities must find ways to promote family involvement in early literacy activities, particularly for preschool children. The impact of early intervention services and programs that provide early childhood special education services needs continued research. What opportunities for early literacy activities might be supported by these services? What are family priorities and how might they be supported regarding early literacy in the home?

The NHES: 95 data set provide a vast array of information reported by families concerning early care and education. This exploratory study raised many question regarding how young children with disabilities from diverse backgrounds are identified and how families could be supported by the service delivery system. Future NHES surveys should be designed to include additional areas in the identification and provision of services for young children with

disabilities. Efforts should be made collect information on both IEP's and IFSP's since some states require IFSP's for children ages 3 to 5 years and all states require IEP's for children older than 5 years.

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Table 1

Number of Subjects by Population Area

Population area	Families with disabilities	Families without disabilities
Rural area	248	1632
Outside an urban area	160	957
Urban area	908	5420
Total	1316	8009

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics

	Rural				Outside Urban Area				Urban			
	Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities		Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities		Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities	
	percent	s.e.[1]	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.
Race/Ethnicity												
White	85.46	2.65	86.73	0.94	72.40	4.11	77.05	1.88	57.07	1.88	59.02	0.83
Black	9.47	2.10	7.24	0.80	11.36	3.51	8.79	1.44	22.84	1.83	19.14	0.54
Hispanic	2.70	0.89	4.00	0.51	12.17	2.73	10.12	0.80	13.51	0.98	15.58	0.35
Other	2.37	1.00	2.03	0.40	4.07	2.26	4.04	0.98	6.57	0.98	6.26	0.39
Mother's Native Language												
English	94.48	1.66	94.43	0.79	92.89	2.12	89.49	1.14	84.68	1.41	80.07	0.71
Not English	1.03	0.48	2.05	0.46	4.76	1.65	5.39	0.60	8.62	0.97	10.81	0.45
Father's Native Language												
English	76.41	2.80	76.22	1.32	65.51	5.07	74.19	2.17	52.38	2.03	59.40	0.79
Not English	0.92	0.48	1.62	0.38	4.81	1.57	4.35	0.58	4.79	0.68	7.40	0.31
Highest Level of Education for the Child's Parents												
Less than high school	10.26	2.55	7.52	0.93	9.65	2.71	6.06	0.90	14.42	1.60	9.37	0.42
H.S. grad or equiv.	37.71	3.65	36.35	1.77	40.66	4.66	32.03	1.66	29.23	1.78	27.97	0.85
Voc. tech. ed. after H.S. or equiv.	32.99	3.34	30.14	1.32	31.91	4.09	32.68	1.87	30.49	1.90	27.33	0.77
College graduate	7.64	1.80	15.02	0.91	11.27	2.84	15.44	1.50	12.70	1.29	18.47	0.75
Graduate or prof. school	11.41	1.98	10.97	1.02	6.51	2.37	13.79	1.31	13.15	1.32	16.86	0.64

[1]s.e. represents standard error

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Table 3
Percentage of Three to Eight Year Olds Who Have Participated in Family Literacy Activities

Activity	Rural				Outside Urban Area				Urban			
	Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities		Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities		Children with disabilities		Children without disabilities	
	percent	s.e.[1]	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.	percent	s.e.
Family member read to the child in the past week												
Not at all	3.89	1.60	5.27	0.59	3.36	1.59	4.72	0.75	6.53	0.89	6.46	0.36
Once or twice	16.72	2.55	14.38	1.04	13.79	3.11	15.79	1.39	18.87	1.44	16.10	0.66
Three or more	28.22	3.30	27.64	1.48	28.24	4.30	28.43	1.70	28.59	1.87	25.96	0.62
Every day	51.17	3.96	52.71	1.65	54.51	4.85	51.06	2.20	46.01	1.82	51.48	0.82
Child read to family member in the past week												
Not at all	4.49	1.40	2.36	0.45	2.89	1.60	1.80	0.50	5.60	0.79	2.65	0.22
Once or twice	12.50	2.80	8.96	0.71	15.09	3.13	7.70	0.96	10.85	1.18	9.19	0.33
Three or more	15.11	2.48	14.55	0.80	10.31	2.75	14.36	1.49	16.44	1.57	13.35	0.47
Every day	17.89	2.60	15.46	0.95	25.03	3.33	18.16	1.38	18.55	1.32	15.09	0.50
									48.57	1.98	59.71	0.43
Child told story by family member												
Yes	77.15	3.71	75.99	1.60	81.33	3.71	75.91	1.93	72.44	2.55	75.88	0.68
No	22.85	3.71	24.01	1.60	18.67	3.71	24.09	1.93	27.56	6.70	24.12	0.68
Once or twice	32.22	3.35	34.29	1.52	38.36	4.89	35.96	1.99	31.10	4.71	35.50	0.75
Three or more	44.93	3.68	41.70	1.55	42.97	4.84	39.93	1.76	41.34	4.52	40.38	0.87
Child visited library with family member in past month												
Yes	39.02	3.32	41.18	1.54	43.27	4.47	47.83	2.03	45.21	1.93	46.74	0.90
No	60.98	3.32	58.82	1.54	56.73	4.47	52.17	2.03	54.79	1.93	53.26	0.90

[1]s.e. represents standard error

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